Women Education: Prospects and Challenges

A Sociological Study in Afghanistan

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INTRODUCTION

Education has been playing a significant role in the progress and development of societies. All achievements in society, economy, politics, and technology are the outcome of education and knowledge. Especially in today's world, the role and importance of education as the motor and instrument of social change and development are widely accepted and valued. There is a strong relationship between development and education. Development goals would not be achieved without education. In other words, there is no alternative pathway to development, peace, stability, and social prosperity other than education. Education is the only effective strategy for building a prosperous and dignified society.

In addition to the substantial impact of education on economic and political development, its role in "human development" is more important. Although human development has broad dimensions, one of its unique and fundamental characteristics is the ability to pursue and achieve life objectives in all their diversity as being fundamentally desirable. In this regard, education stands as a vital means of enabling individuals to follow their goals and desires. Learning is considered to have a dual role in human development. One, as an instrumental, it develops internal abilities; second, intrinsically, education is valuable. Therefore, being literate, being capable of acquiring information, and understanding are regarded as part of a dignified and prosperous life and indexes for human development (McCowan 2019: 40).

Based on the human development concept, women empowerment and gender equality can be achieved through education. Through learning and acquiring knowledge and skills, women would become capable of pursuing their life goals and desires. Raising awareness is the immediate result of education on women, enabling them to

fight for their rights effectively. Awareness also enables women to stand firmly against discrimination and injustice. Education can empower women to break the chains of oppression, isolation, disparity, and negative attitudes that are the main obstacle to enacting their meaningful role and presence in society.

Although the value of education in human development, especially in women empowerment, is widely accepted in the modern era, education remains a dream for millions of women and girls in Afghanistan. Millions of women and girls did not find the chance to get an education due to several challenges**.**

After 2001 Afghanistan with the direct support of the international community, made significant efforts to improve women's education. As a result, prominent progress has been achieved. The number of students in government public education increased from 2.3 million, including 700,000 girls, in 2002 (Samady 2013) to 9,1 million, including 3,5 million girls (39%) in 2019. The total enrolment at the primary level reached 5.7 million students, out of whom 2.3 million (40 percent) were girls. In the lower secondary and upper secondary levels, girls constituted 38 and 36 percent, respectively (National Statistics and Information Authority 2020: 64). Also, in 2018 ministry of education recorded 459,586 attending students in private education centers (till 14^{th} class), of whom 29 percent were girls (Ministry of Education of Afghanistan 2018). In higher education, enrolment of girls increased from 4,200 (13 %) in 2002 (Samady 2013) to 54,861 (28%) in 2019 in government universities and higher education institutions (National Statistics and Information Authority 2020: 91).

Despite all the notable progress regarding women's education, Afghanistan still has one the lowest female literacy rates in the world. The main barriers preventing millions of women and girls from getting an education in Afghanistan are socio-cultural norms, security, economic and administrative challenges.

Geography and Social Profile of Afghanistan

A landlocked Afghanistan located in the heart of Asia, connecting three large cultural and geographic regions: The Indian subcontinent to the southeast, central Asia in the north, and the Iranian plateau to the west (Barfield 2010: 1). The total geographical area of Afghanistan is 652,864 Km^2, administratively divided into 34 provinces (National Statistics and Information Authority 2020: 3). Afghanistan shares borders with countries including China (76 km) in the northeast, Iran (936 km) in the west, Pakistan (2,430 km) in the east and south, Tajikistan (1,206 km), Uzbekistan (137 km) and Turkmenistan (744 km) in the north and northwest (The Library of Congress 2008; Roy 2008: 12).

The country comprises 34 provinces with four strategically important cities like Kabul, Kandahar, Mazar-i-Sharif, and Herat. Kabul is the capital of Afghanistan, located in the east. Mazar-i-Sharif is situated in the northern center of the country, reachable from Kabul via highway across the Hindu Kush. Kandahar is located in the south on the way to Herat in the west (Roy 2008: 14). Kunduz, Jalalabad, Taloqan, Puli Khumri, Ghzani, Maymana, Bamyan, Kunduz and Khost are the other important cities in Afghanistan.

The population of Afghanistan in 2019-20 was estimated to be around 32.2 million. Of that, males and females form 51 percent and 49 percent, respectively. Of the total population, 24.5 million live in rural areas, and 7.7 million are urban residents. Afghanistan has one of the world's youngest populations, with 47.7 percent (15.4 million) below the age of 15 years. In comparison, 65 and above are only around 2.7 percent. "The proportion of under 15 years is among the highest in the world and significantly higher than that of the neighboring countries" (National Statistics and

Information Authority 2020: 8). This young population of Afghanistan results in a very high dependency ratio. For every 101.4 persons of the working age group 15-65, there are 100 persons in the low/less productive ages of below 15 and above 64. According to data from 2003-2005 and the population census in 1979, the population growth rate in Afghanistan is estimated at 2.14 percent per year. Due to the migration of citizens from rural to urban, the growth of the urban population is higher than that in rural areas (National Statistics and Information Authority 2020: 8).

The nation of Afghanistan is constituted of different and diverse ethnic groups and tribes, including Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, Turkman, Baluch, Pashaie, Nuristani, Aymaq, Arab, Qirghiz, Qizilbash, Gujur, Brahawi, and others. However, Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, and Uzbek are the four major ethnic groups. Link to the ethnic diversity, many languages, including Persian, Pashto, Uzbeki, Turkmani, Nuristani, Balochi, and Pashai, are spoken in the country. Persian (Dari), Pashto, and Uzbik are the languages that have more speakers than the others. Persian and Pashto are the official languages of the country.

Afghanistan is an Islamic country where Muslims form almost 99.5 percent of the population. Muslims in Afghanistan divide into different sects, such as Sunni, Shia, and Ismaili. Moreover, there are minorities of Hindus, Sikhs, and Jews mainly residing in urban areas. Despite the differences among Muslims based on their sects, Islam plays a central role as a unifying factor in Afghanistan. Islam has a profound influence on the life, social, and political system of the people. Islamic culture and principles are strongly connected with social attitudes and values, the relationship among people, its laws, political, economic and national, and international issues (Richard 2009: 14).

Bamyan, Kandahar and Kapisa

Three provinces, such as Bamyan, Kandahar, and Kapisa, have been chosen as the data collection field for the present study.

Bamyan

Bamyan is located in the center of Afghanistan and shares a border with Baghlan and Parwan provinces in the northeast, Wardak and Ghazni in the southeast, Daikundi province in the southwest, Ghor province in the west, Sari-Pul in the northwest and Samanangan in the north. Bamyan is the largest province in the central part of Afghanistan. It is also famous for being the cultural capital of the Hazara ethnic group, dominantly inhabitant in the region. The total land area of Bamyan is 18,029 sq. km, which constitutes 2.8 percent of the Afghanistan territory. Bamyan is a mountainous province where almost 90 percent is covered by mountains (Central Statistics Organization 2013). Concerning administrative division, Bamyan is divided into seven districts: Waras, Panjab, Yakawalang 1, Yakawalang 2, Saighan, Kahmard and Shibar.

Bamyan is also famous for being a historical province having many reputed historical sites, including the Buddha sculptures with more than 3,000 caves surrounding it, Golghola and Zakhak ancient towns, Feroz Bahar, Dara-i-Ajhdar, Estopa, Klegan, Gawhargin, Kaferan, Chelburj, and the Band-e Amir (Central Statistics Organization 2013).

The estimated total population of Bamyan is 486,928; from that, 240,135 (49.3%) are female, and 246,793 (50.6 %) are male. Out of the total population, 14,394 (3 %) are urban residents, and 472,534 (97%) live in rural areas. The total number of students enrolled in government public schools is 139,888; of that, 46 percent are girls. Further, Bamyan has 3,390 teachers in government schools, of that 27 percent are females (National Statistics and Information Authority 2020: 10, 64-65). Agriculture is

the primary economic and livelihood resource of people. The tourism industry is yet another resource. Tens of thousands of tourists visit Bamyan every year.

Kapisa

Kapsia is located to the northeast of Kabul. Kapisa shares borders with Panjsher in the north, Kabul in the south, Laghman in the east, and Parwan province to the southwest. Despite being a small province, Kapisa is an important and strategic province famous as the gateway for Kabul. The total land area of Kapisa is 1,824 sq. km (Central Statistics Organization 2015), which constitutes 0.3 percent of Afghanistan's total area (National Statistics and Information Authority 2020: 3). Including the provincial capital (Mahmud Raqi), the province has seven districts, such as Hissa-e-Awali Kohistan, Hissa-e-Duwumi Kohistan, Koh Band, Tagab, Nijrab, and Alasay. Around 54 percent of the province is mountainous or semi-mountainous (Central Statistics Organization 2015). Kapisa is an agricultural province where varieties of crops, including different kinds of fruits, are cultivated.

The estimated total population of Kapisa was 479,875 in 2019; of that, 2,37,591 (48.7 %) were female, and 242,284 (49.7 %) were male. Out of the total population, 98.1 percent are living in rural areas of the province. Kapisa had 136,919 students in government public schools in 2019, out of which 35 percent were girls. Likewise, the total number of teachers in government schools in Kapisa was 2,932, that 19 percent were female teachers (National Statistics and Information Authority 2020: 10, 64-65). Different ethnic groups, including Tajik, Pashtun, Pashaie, and others, live in Kapisa, but Tajik is the dominant ethnic group.

Kandahar

Kandahar is one of the southern provinces of Afghanistan that shares borders with Pakistan to the southeast, Zabul province to the northwest, Urozgan province to

the north, and the province of Helmand to the west. With a total land area of 54,845 sq. km, Kandahar constitutes 8.4 percent of Afghanistan territory. The province has 15 districts (National Statistics and Information Authority 2020: 3).

According to the 2019 survey, the estimated population of Kandahar province is 1368,036, including 670,736 (49 %) females and 697,300 (51 %) males. Out of the total population, 506,794 (37 %) are urban residents and 861,242 (63 %) are settled in rural areas. The total number of students enrolled in government public schools is 240,660; of that, 25 percent are girls. Further, Kandahar has 5,128 teachers in government schools, of that 19 percent are females (National Statistics and Information Authority 2020: 11).

The dominant ethnic group living in Kandahar is Durrani Pashtuns speaking in Pashto, but other ethnic groups also live in Kandahar. The economy of Kandahar mostly depends upon agriculture. Varieties of crops, including fresh fruits, are the agricultural harvest of the province. Business plays the second role in the province after agriculture. Kandahar is one of the economic hubs of Afghanistan. The strategic location of Kandahar, the significant transportation link with different provinces, and the border shares with Pakistan are among the important factors that make Kandahar a significant province for business.

Statement of the Problem

After 2001 (after the removal of the Taliban from power), the government of Afghanistan made significant efforts to improve and expand educational opportunities for all, particularly for women. The efforts have had considerable outcomes. The number of students in government public schools increased from 2.3 million, including 700,000 girls, in 2002 (Samady 2013) to 9,1 million, including 3,5 million girls (39 %)

in 2019 (National Statistics and Information Authority 2019). This is an impressive improvement that has happened ever in the history of Afghanistan. However, millions of girls at the school going age are still not enrolled, or even those who were enrolled did not get a chance to complete their secondary level. Socio-cultural, administrative, economic, and security factors are involved in girls' deprivation of their right to education. This study will further explore and describe the challenges.

Several papers and research regarding women education in Afghanistan highlight the challenges and barriers. However, they do not provide an in-depth, detailed, comprehensive, and sociological picture of the topic. Also, there is a dearth of understanding about socio-cultural opportunities currently encouraging women education in Afghanistan. Moreover, the current literature does not explain what the people of Afghanistan perceive and think about women education. The present study also examines the role of education in women empowerment in Afghanistan.

Therefore, this study intends to uncover the opportunities and challenges of women education from a sociological perspective and provide a broad understanding of the topic. Hence the study is proposed as: "Women Education: Prospects and Challenges - A Sociological Study in Afghanistan."

Objectives of the study

1. To study the situation of women education in Afghanistan from a sociological perspective.
2. To study the challenges and opportunities for women education in Afghanistan.
3. To examine people's perceptions about women education in Afghanistan.
4. To examine the role of education in women empowerment in Afghanistan.

5. To help the policymakers and the government address the challenges of women education in Afghanistan.

Significance of the study

Many scholars and organizations have published papers and reports about women education in Afghanistan, but most are as simple as a report and predominantly statistical. This study attempts to go beyond and assess the topic from a sociological perspective to develop a reliable insight in the form of academic research for use in academic institutions. Significantly, this study will highlight the main challenges creating barriers to women access to education. Providing a clear picture of challenges will help policymakers develop suitable education policies for effectively addressing the challenges and barriers. Furthermore, this study will offer responsive recommendations to the government and other educational practitioners to provide and expand further educational opportunities for women in Afghanistan.

Methodology

This study concentrates on women education in Afghanistan from a sociological perspective, with the main focus on challenges and opportunities ahead of women access to education. The focus is on describing the situation of women education and understanding the perception of Afghanistan society about women education. Based on the objectives, scope, and nature of the study, the descriptive research method is used. The study is a fact-finding study regarding female education in Afghanistan, the descriptive method was adopted as the most appropriate method.

The present study makes use of both secondary and primary data. The secondary data has been taken from different related books, journal articles, reports and some sources, including statistical yearbooks published by the government of Afghanistan.

The secondary data was used to provide background information for the study, research area and information about the number of girls attending schools and universities in Afghanistan. The primary data was collected from the respondents using a structured questionnaire.

The sample comprises 400 respondents selected from the provinces of Bamyan, Kapisa, and Kandahar. The study population comprises students, teachers, parents, and officials from Bamyan, Kandahar, and Kapisa provinces. Both men and women have equally been selected as respondents. Collecting data from both genders helped to know what men and women think about women education and the differences between their understandings and perceptions.

Non-probability purposive sampling was used in this study. The respondents were selected purposively based on the requirements of the study. The purpose was to select respondents with at least basic knowledge about women education, especially when data were collected from ordinary people. Second, to select students as research participants from insecure areas who were studying at the University of Alberuni in Kapisa and the University of Kandahar.

The data was collected from respondents using a structured questionnaire. The structured interview schedule was used in case filling out the questionnaire was not feasible for respondents. Before constructing the questionnaire, an intensive literature survey was done to identify challenges and opportunities (variables) for women education in Afghanistan. The questionnaire constructed in English language, later was translated into Persian for the benefit of the respondents.

After processing, the collocated data were analyzed through descriptive and inferential statistical measures like frequency, percentage, cross-tabulation, Factor

Analysis and Relative Importance Index. The measures were derived through SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences).

Limitations of the Study

1. The study is limited to the analysis of women education. Therefore, the findings may not be applicable to general education in Afghanistan.
2. The present study investigates the challenges and opportunities for women education in Afghanistan, with its unique socio-cultural and economic context. Therefore the findings may not be applicable to elsewhere.

Thesis Structure

The first chapter is introductory and provides a general understanding of the study. This chapter introduces Afghanistan through its history, geography, economy, and society to help clearly understand the study area. The history of women education in Afghanistan, with a particular focus on modern education is also discussed. It explains what efforts in the 20th century were made to provide education for women and why they were unsuccessful. The chapter will also discuss about study's objectives, statement of the problem and significance of the study. The chapter concludes with a detailed description of the methodology, including the selection of the sample, data collection and data analysis.

Chapter two provides a review of the literature. The review has been conducted in a broad-based manner, including literature on the importance of education in women lives, the socio-economic benefits of female education, women's education in western countries, Asian countries, Islamic societies and Afghanistan. This chapter attempts to highlight the historical revolution of women education in different societies,

achievements and contemporary challenges and opportunities. The research gap and justifications for this study are also briefly discussed.

The third chapter presents the demographic profile of the respondents. It presents respondents' detailed information about their gender, age, province, area of residents, marital status, language, religious sect, educational qualification, job and family income.

Chapter four concentrates on the study's main theme. This chapter presents the data analysis on challenges of women education in Afghanistan from socio-cultural, economic, security and administrative aspects. It also explores different factors that encourage women education in Afghanistan. The other issue that this chapter deals with is the perception of people about women education and its role in women personal, social and political empowerment.

Chapter five concludes the study. It presents a summary of the main findings and some recommendations for the government, policymakers, and future studies.

Review of Literature

Education is a fundamental right that every human being should enjoy equally regardless of differences of whatsoever. However, the reality in the case of women is different. Throughout the world, women experience inequality with regard to their rights to education. The reality that "two-thirds of the world's non-literate adults are women" demonstrates that educational inequality persistently exists, and women are constantly discriminated against (Global Campaign for Education 2012). However, the terrain of gender disparity in education has seen remarkable changes in recent decades (Buchmann et al. 2008). In 2010, the proportion of females aged between 25-29 years with a college education was more than that of males in more than 139 countries (Esteve

et al. 2016). Particularly in industrialized societies, including the United States and Europe, concerning girls' enrollment in schools and universities, noticeable progress has been realized to the extent that literature terms it a "reversal of gender gap in education" (Esteve et al. 2016).

Therefore, Breen et al. (2010) challenge the claim of "persistence inequality in education" as their finding from seven European countries indicates that disparity between males and females in their educational achievements declined prominently. Interestingly, "changes in class inequality in educational attainment have been similar for both men and women" (Breen et al., 2010). Fleischmann et al. (2014) did a comparative study from 9 Western countries to understand whether second-generation immigrants get the same female education advantages that are widespread in their western host countries. The study found that female educational advantage observed among the majority population also exists among second-generation immigrants. Even those parents who had come from countries where gender inequality in education has pervasively existed, their children enjoy educational advantages the same as the majority population in host countries. Literature attributes the progress to the parents' educational background (Buchmann et al. 2006), family resources, increase in women's wages in the labor market, expansion of the college system and changes in gender-role attitudes (Buchmann et al. 2008).

However, the bulk of literature emphasizes that even in industrialized societies, women still face discrimination according to their field of study as they are underrepresented in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). Gender stereotypes and traditional gender roles underline the decision of women in selecting their field of study. Women are more likely to choose humanities since it is

regarded as a female-typical subject (Barone 2011; Charles & Bradley 2009; Sarseke 2018; van der Vleuten et al. 2019).

While western countries have achieved gender parity in enrollment and graduation, the scenario is different in Asia. Although some countries in Asia have attained or are likely to attain the universal goal in primary education, the rest, especially South Asian countries, witness remarkable gender disparity in access to education. Poverty accounts for one of the main hindrances to women's education in most South Asian countries (Chitrakar 2009). Families with inadequate financial resources are more likely tend to invest in boys' education which consequently reduces girls' schooling (Swainson 2006).

Along with economic challenges and poverty, socio-cultural norms such as the Kinship system, prevalent in the South Asian region, hamper women's education. According to the kinship system, when a girl gets married, she has to leave the parental house and go to her husband's home. After the marriage, no accepted norms exist for her to help her parents and sibling (Dube 1997: 147-148). Thus, families treat girls as "temporary guests" who will ultimately go to the husband's home. In some parts of South Asia, a saying goes, "Bringing up a girl is like planting a sapling in another's courtyard" or "Bringing up a daughter is like pouring water into sand" (Aziz and Maloney as cited in Dube 1997: 148). Among cultural norms, the Purdah system is the other main barrier hindering access to education. The families who observe the purdah are not ready to send their daughters to high schools or higher education institutes. Based on the purdah role, girls' schooling is perceived as a violation of purdah; therefore, it negatively affects the girl's reputation and can impact her future, especially her marriage (Ambreen & Politics 2014).

Women in Afghanistan also experience similar challenges prevalent in south Asian countries. Gender segregation is widely practiced in the country in different forms. Some still do not believe girls have the right to education. Some families do not let their daughters go to school because they think women should stay home and do domestic chores. Gender stereotypes and gender norms play a central role in families' decisions about girls' education (Barr 2017). Women's seclusion is culturally regarded as ideal. Many negative gossips and bad traits are labelled to school girls and their families. Public presence and interaction with non-kin males are viewed as shameful and assumed to contribute to harming the females' ethics and morality, with consequences in the broader public domain for the general extended family/parentage honor (Hunte 2006).

Insecurity stands as the other challenge to educational progress in Afghanistan. Mainly, women education is the primary victim of insecurity (Kissane 2012; UNAMA 2019); in an insecure situation, parents will not risk sending their daughters to educational institutions (Barr 2017). Alvi-Aziz (2008) states that lawlessness, warlordism, extortion, drug trafficking, and gender-based crime (rape, murder, kidnap, forced marriage), terrorism, hazardous road and threatening of girls by fundamentalist groups are the security and safety threats to female education in Afghanistan.

Studies also found that poverty (Barr 2017; Jackson 2011) and the shortage of female teachers (Chitrakar 2009; Hedayat & Harpviken 2014; Jones 2008) are the other main obstacle to girls schooling in Afghanistan.

The reviewed literature studied some of the challenges to women education in Afghanistan from different perspectives and scopes. The present study intends to comprehensively examine further barriers to women education and provide an in-depth

and detailed sociological understanding. This study aims to group challenges into meaningful and representative factors. It is also important to rank the factors to understand each factor's degree of effect on women education.

Despite serious social, political and economic barriers to women's education, there are factors and prospects supporting women education in the country that have not been studied so far. The present study explores the opportunities from a sociological outlook, focusing mainly on socio-cultural opportunities.

A large part of the joint efforts of Afghanistan and the international community, including international organizations between 2001 and 2021, has focused on expanding women's access to education as an essential tool for women empowerment. In turn, notable progress has been achieved with a dramatic increase in the number of girls attending schools and universities. However, whether education in the patriarchal society of Afghanistan can empower women empirically remain unobserved and no research has been conducted to study the topic. Therefore, one of the objectives of the present study is to explore and examine the role of education in women empowerment in Afghanistan.

Major Findings

Demographic Information of the Respondents

1. In the present study, 50 percent of respondents are female and 50 percent are male.
2. The data reveals that the majority (54%) of respondents are in the age group of 16-30 and 31.8 percent are in the age group of 31-45. Only 13 percent and 1.3 percent are in the age group of 46-60 and above 60, respectively.
3. Most of the respondents (57.5%) are married, others are unmarried (41%) and a small number of widows and divorced.
4. The study found that 11.8 of the respondents are illiterate, 1l percent have primary education and 7.5 percent have secondary education. Likewise, 25.4 percent have a high school degree, 36.3 percent are university graduates and 4.3 hold post-graduate degrees. The level of education of young respondents aged 16-30 is higher than middle and older aged respondents. The reason is that young respondents found the chance to continue their higher education in the past two decades (2001-2021), while due to war and shortage of educational facilities, middle and older age respondents were deprived of education when they were in their childhood and young age in the 1980s and 1990s.
5. The data shows that a significant number of respondents (32%) are unemployed, 24.8 percent are self-employed and 24 percent work at government offices. A small number (4.4%) work in the private sector and 14 percent mentioned other jobs. According to the data, the unemployment rate is higher among female respondents than males.
6. It was found that 70 percent of the respondents have less than 100,000 Afghanis (Afs) annual family income, 23.7 percent have 100,001-500,000 Afs annual family

income, and 4.5 and 1.8 have 500,001-1,000,000 Afs and 1,000,000 Afs above, respectively. The study observes that the annual family income of the majority of the respondents is less than 100,000 Afs which is less than thousand two hundred USD. Although there is no remarkable difference between the average family income among respondents from the three provinces, the average annual family income of respondents from Kandahar is slightly higher than Kapisa and Bamyan.

Challenges to Women Education in Afghanistan

1. The research reveals that girls in Afghanistan have no equal access to education. Although boys also face several challenges ahead of their access to education, girls face severe obstacles, inequalities and discrimination.

2. Having the freedom to decide on their education is vital for girls enabling them to choose to what level they want to continue their education, what stream of study they want to select, and where and in which institute they are willing to study. In other words, the more freedom girls get to decide on their education, the more they are likely to continue and complete their higher education. On the contrary, if they do not have the freedom to decide about their education, it may negatively affect their education. The study found that a vast majority of the respondents reported that girls in Afghanistan do not have the freedom to decide about their education. Mainly parents decide about their education, the field and place of study.

3. The Exploratory Factor Analysis result suggested that five factors, including Security, Socio-Cultural, Resource and Infrastructure constraints, Marriage and Economic, are the main factors limiting women's access to education in Afghanistan. According to the Relative Importance Index (RII) result, the economic factor was ranked first, marriage second, resource and infrastructure constraints

third, the socio-cultural factor fourth, and the security factor fifth most significant barriers to women education.

Among the five mentioned factors, the economic (poverty) factor is the most significant impediment to women education in Afghanistan. It is noteworthy that the severity of the challenges to some extent, varies from region to region. For instance, according to the findings, insecurity is not a serious barrier to women education in Bamyan province, but it is a serious obstacle in Kandahar province.

4. In addition to the mentioned factors, the respondents also reported distance from school, no proper roads and extreme weather as geographical barriers to the education of women. Due to several reasons, including political, economic, social, and significantly long-lasting war, Afghanistan remained an underdeveloped country where having necessary infrastructures, including accessible schools and proper road facilities connecting regions, remain a dream for its citizens. Without such facilities with the harsh geographical nature of Afghanistan, it would be difficult and sometimes impossible for students, particularly girls, to walk through mountainous and hazardous ways to reach school. The challenges make families reluctant to send their daughters to school.

5. The study found that school dropout among girls in Afghanistan is very high. Nearly half of the respondents have reported cases of girls' school dropouts in their families, which is a matter of concern. According to the findings, 58.7 percent of respondents from Kandahar, 39 percent from Kapisa and 48 percent from Bamyna have reported girls' dropout cases in their families. Thirty two percent of the dropouts occurred in primary, 42 percent in secondary, and 26 percent in high school. There are different reasons for girls' dropout raised by respondents; safety

concerns, economic problems, lack of accessible schools, marriage, cultural norms, and lack of family permission are the primary reasons.

6. Shortage of female teachers is a serious problem in Afghanistan that have a negative impact on girls' education. In the absence of female teachers, many families will not allow their daughters to attend classes with male teachers. The majority of the respondents stated that they are not comfortable sending girls to schools where there are no female teachers. They stated that their culture and religion do not allow them to send girls to school without female teachers.

Opportunities for Women Education

1. The study found that the attitudes of parents are changing toward women education, which means parents are becoming more supportive of their daughter's education. Furthermore, the study also observed that changing the attitudes of people toward women education is an opportunity that expands the chances of women and girls for education. Although socio-cultural barriers persist in Afghanistan, at the same time, the perception and understanding of people, to some extent, have changed in favour of women education. In other words, presently, the education of women receives further family and societal support compared to the past.

2. The majority of respondents cited religious support as the other opportunity for the education of women in the country.

3. The study also found that media and civil society, through their awareness-raising and advocacy programmes play a constructive role in promoting women education. In the past two decades, media and civil society in Afghanistan have taken a significant part in promoting women's rights in general and the right to education in particular. Even now, amid increasing political and financial restrictions, they continue to stand and advocate for the education of women.

Female respondents agree more than males about the mentioned opportunities. The reason may be that women have experienced long-lasting inequality and gender discrimination in Afghanistan, where opportunities at any level make them more optimistic. Further, respondents from Bamyan are more likely to agree about the opportunities than those from Kandahar and Kapisa.

4. With regards to the perception of people about women education, the study observes that the majority of the respondents agree that education is a fundamental right of women. Similarly, the majority of the respondents endorsed that women education is important for improving economic conditions and considered female education as vital means for peace and stability in Afghanistan. Although the majority of male and female respondents agree about the importance of women education, females agree more than males. Among the respondents from three provinces, participants from Bamyan and Kapisa agreed more about the importance of female education than respondents from Kandahar. The study revealed that among different sources and means, self-study, families and relatives and media played the most significant role in shaping the perception of respondents about the importance of female education.

The role of Education in Women Empowerment

1. The majority of the respondents agree that education plays a significant role in advancing women's positions in the family in Afghanistan. Education enhances women abilities to manage their families better and allows them to participate in household decision-making. Education also empowers women to make strategic life choices, including whom to marry, how many children to have and making the right decision about their children's education. It also enables them to take care of their reproductive health.

2. The study observes that respondents experienced that education potentially enhances the political engagement of women in Afghanistan. The study found that education empowers women to enjoy their political rights and meaningfully participate in political activities. Likewise, a vast majority of the respondents agree that education empowers women to change the current situation in Afghanistan politics by challenging the male-club political system. Moreover, education gives women the power and autonomy to contest elections and enables them to cast their votes independently.

3. Education is an effective strategy for improving women's social status because education gives women the power and knowledge to challenge gender norms and social inequalities. According to the majority of the research participants, in Afghanistan, education empowers women to enjoy more social freedom and enhances their ability and skills to participate in social activities. Significantly, the majority of the participants cited that education enables women to participate in community decision-making and also take community leadership roles.

Overall, female respondents agree more than males about the role of education in women's political and social empowerment. Also, respondents from Bamyan agree more than those from Kapisa and Kandahar.

Recommendations

1. The study found that one of the primary barriers to women education is the shortage of accessible schools in Afghanistan. Many parents do not risk sending their daughters to long-distance schools with hazardous roads. Therefore, building more schools, particularly in rural areas, should be a high priority. Further, the schools must have adequate water, sanitation, toilets and restrooms.

2. In high schools and universities, kindergartens need to be established so that those female students who have children can keep their children in kindergarten and continue their education. In the lack of kindergarten in schools and other educational institutions, most of the students who have children will be forced to leave school or university.

3. One successful strategy that increases girls' enrollment and retention till high school is recruiting an adequate number of female teachers. The presence of female teachers makes families more interested in letting their daughters get enrolled in schools and continue until higher levels. Given this, recruiting more female teachers, particularly in provinces with fewer female teachers, must be an urgent and high priority for government and donor organizations in Afghanistan.

4. The government must pay its ultimate attention by using all its capabilities to secure the roads for girls going to and coming from schools. The roads should be safe and free of any kind of threat and harassment. More families will be encouraged to let their daughters attend school if they find the roads secure and free of hazards and harassment.

5. Media, civil society organizations and public figures should further coordinate and strengthen to advocate for women education. Their efforts should be focused on changing the prevailing gender stereotype in Afghanistan and shaping public perception in favor of women's rights in general and the right to education in particular. They should improve public awareness about the undeniable importance of women education for development, sustainable peace and prosperity in Afghanistan. The efforts should include correcting misconceptions and socio-cultural norms limiting the chances of girls' schooling.

6. Media and civil society also need to intensively advocate to convince the authorities in Afghanistan to uphold women's rights in general and the right to education in particular. The advocacy and efforts must focus on including the agenda of gender equality at all levels of the government.

7. One of the challenges that respondents reported is sexual harassment in educational centres, including schools and universities. Educational institutions must take practical and outcome-based actions to confront sexual harassment. An inclusive plan is required to guide the institutions in effectively eliminating harassment. Educating staff, teachers and students about sexual harassment and its consequences, empowering students on how to deal with harassment, providing legal support for victims and disciplinary and punishment steps against perpetrators are some strategies that help education institutions effectively fight against sexual harassment.

8. To have a gender-sensitive curriculum free of gender biases and stereotypes, a committee of experts must thoroughly screen the current curriculum and highlight all the gender biases and patriarchal messages to be removed from school/university textbooks, course contents and other educational materials. The review and revision should result in the formulation of a new curriculum that is gender sensitive and gender transformative that could change students' current patriarchal and misogynist attitudes. A curriculum that increases the visibility of women and girls as strong, empowered and independent role models. The full involvement of women experts in the curriculum-making process will ensure a bias-free curriculum.

9. The findings show that education in Afghanistan empowers women in different aspects of their lives. However, to further improve the role of education in the patriarchal society of Afghanistan, where women experience widespread inequality

and discrimination, an empowering education needs to be designed to enhance women's critical understanding of their values, rights and positions in society. Formal education in Afghanistan must make women aware of the root cause of inequalities and discrimination they experience. The empowering education will enhance women's self-esteem and make them able to counter all gender-based disparities in society. Empowering education enables women to become an active force of change and progress in society through taking a constructive part in social, political and economic activities. For a country like Afghanistan, with a poor economy, political and social instability and the lowest human development index, women empowerment and gender equality should be considered essential to sustainable peace and development. Women empowerment is an integral part of the development process, without which Afghanistan will always go through human disaster because gender inequality intensifies poverty, conflict and instability.

Suggestions for Future Research

1. Further research is urged to comparatively study the challenges and opportunities of women education in rural and urban areas of Afghanistan.
2. The present study did not focus much on the role of education in women's economic empowerment; this dimension could be explored in future research.

Conclusion

The present research studied the prospects and challenges of women education and examined the perception of Afghanistan people about women education and its role women lives. The study found that insecurity, socio-cultural norms, resource and infrastructure constraints, marriage, economic (poverty) and geographical factors are the primary barriers to women's education in Afghanistan. The result also reveals that despite serious social, political and economic barriers to women education, there are factors and prospects supporting women education in the country. According to the findings, the attitudes of parents and society are changing towards women education in the sense that presently women education receives further family and societal support compared to the past. Further, media and civil society also play a constructive role in supporting women education in Afghanistan through awareness-raising and advocacy programmes.

The study found that education plays a significant role in women empowerment in Afghanistan. Education empowers women to manage their families better, participate in household decision-making, choose their life partners, decide about the number of children and effectively look after their reproductive health and well-being. Further, education is the key to enjoying equal political rights and meaningful political participation. In the patriarchal society of Afghanistan, where gender norms prevent women from participating in social activities, the result implies that education is an effective strategy for enhancing women's role in social activities.

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